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Keeping contra aid within limits

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Since the Senate debate on Nicaragua in August, almost nothing has been heard on the subject, either from the administration or from Congress. House Speaker O'Neill and about half the members of the Senate have not quit trying, however, to square US policy with the old belief that America is, not - at least should not be - an aggressor nation. They aim to limit the damage done when the House and Senate narrowly approved contra aid.

The administration has been quietly preparing to nurture a major war between early October, when Congress recesses so that its members can campaign, and sometime after Washington's Birthday, when the legislators resume serious business.

The "\$100 million" voted for the contras is a misnomer. The administration is actually on the verge of achieving a 10-fold-to-20-fold increase in the subsidy for the war in Nicaragua.

In 1986, the administration won \$27 million in "humanitarian aid," but supplemented that with money slipped to the contras through CIA and Defense Department subterfuges. The 1986 total is uncertain, but \$50 million is a conservative estimate.

Now, the administration is about to acquire rights to up to three-quarters of a billion dollars in mostly military aid - along with the \$100 million, up to \$400 million from CIA contingency funds, and \$300 million in hush

money, voted for neighboring "democracies," such as Honduras and El Salvador.

One hundred million dollars over five months is not enough to be decisive. After contra graft accounts have been fattened, enough may remain to cause a few thousand more casualties - some Sandinista and some contra - and with the CIA openly in charge, the mayhem will be more efficiently managed. Sluicing half a billion dollars into the war, though, could ignite something serious.

That issue should reemerge now because the summer's votes have not yet been translated into law. O'Neill refused to name House members of a conference committee that would have reconciled differences with the Senate. That meant President Reagan never got a bill to sign. Contra aid was dumped into the mammoth continuing resolution (the "CR," in governmentese) covering spending in the new fiscal year.

The task of those trying to curb the Nicaraguan war is damage control: to ensure that the CR contains \$100 million, *period* - not "\$100 million" and much, much more, as has been planned.

The stopper is an amendment offered by Sen. Robert Byrd that lost narrowly in August but will be reinserted in the CR. It caps contra aid at \$100 million, stipulating that "no funds may be expended" except as specifically authorized. That rules out CIA contingency funds and complicates the standard Pentagon boondoggles, such as "leasing" equipment, lending it after maneuvers, or

jouncing it off the backs of US trucks on Honduran roads into bushes full of contras.

White House jawboning is likely to peak by Tuesday. The task for O'Neill and the others is to insist that the damage-control provisions remain in the CR, which Reagan will have to sign to keep writing checks, and to build a record of votes that will haunt the pro-war faction.

The administration thinks the lesson of Vietnam is that Third World wars can be waged if they are farmed out to proxies so that no US casualties are incurred. But Congress, too, ought to have learned a lesson from Vietnam: belligerent administrations must be kept on a short leash.

If O'Neill and Co. stick to their guns, lots of people win. Voters get a choice in November instead of tweedledee-tweedledum. Given such a choice, on this issue, Reagan loses. Taxpayers save money. American parents and children save blood. Central America, including Nicaragua's "democratic" neighbors, wins by not being dragged into a maelstrom.

Odd as it may seem, contra foot soldiers win because they aren't seduced into serving as Reagan Doctrine cannon fodder. Even the CIA comes out ahead. As it begins to refocus on the worthwhile work of intelligence, it disentangles from the stupid, immoral business of creating gratuitous wars against the will of most of the American public.

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